



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE BETTER PART IN CONVERSATION

BY O. W. FIRKINS.

IN this casual little essay I am quite free from the bad conscience which in our over-lessoned time is the sure mark of a didactic intention. I have no wish to urge my readers to reform either themselves or their countrymen in the matter of mutual speech. I am only too happy that in this much-regulated world something, however humble, should be left to mismanage itself in peace, and, of all things in the world, conversation has surely the best right to prefer its instinctive or indigenious sins to its imported or inoculated virtues. In these days when the jurisdiction of conscience embraces every sphere—except, shall we say, the sphere of morals?—conversation, among men of ordinary decency and courtesy, should be allowed all the privileges proper to the gipsy and the wastrel that it is. Why, then, speak of its “better part”? Why seek to rivet the chain to the rhythm of flowing periods in praise of the delights of liberty? The question is apposite, but may not a sketch of the ideal to which some familiar and cherished exercise inevitably approximates be of real interest even where circumstances forbid us to seek to realize it—even where, as in the present instance, the effort at realization would be itself an infraction of the ideal?

In America to-day conversation is kept back both by racial and temporal or (to use a good word which Emerson has been unwisely allowed to monopolize) secular impediments. Neither the Englishman nor his transatlantic variant or abridgment, the American, is inherently a speaker. With the suppler Latin races speech has the ease and artlessness of breathing, of which, indeed, as physiologists and the analytic Sir John Falstaff assure us, it is nothing more than a modification. But the Teuton remembers that speech is a muscular exertion as well as an efflux, and he classes it with

boxing and wrestling among athletic or gymnastic feats. If the topic be serious, the difference between his speech and that of the Frenchman is the difference between an ultimatum and a *pourparler*. The object of talk for him is to expedite the reversion to silence. Talk for talk's sake, conversation in the artistic sense, is in his eyes (or ears) a condescension, an episode, a parenthesis. He apologizes to his ancestors and compatriots for doing such a thing at all by doing it badly; to do it well would be a frivolity.

The record of the great talkers of England—take, for instance, that autocratic dynasty whom Holmes designated by the titles of Samuel the First, Samuel the Second, and Thomas—hardly fills us with envy of their auditors. The intimates of Johnson, the first of the Samuels, paid high for their privileges—high enough to make one quite content with a safe asylum in the twentieth century and the candor of the immitigable Boswell. The great lexicographer (the overbearing designation is happily typical), except in moments when the depths of his perversely generous heart were touched, might be ranked among the most gregarious and yet the least sociable of men. Even in the drawing-room or the club, the Tory in him was stanch for prerogative.

One doubts, again, if the privileged are always the fortunate when one reads the story of the disquisitions of the second Samuel (Coleridge) at Highgate as reflected, for instance, in the opening pages of the *Life of John Sterling*, lifting its obsequious auditory to the seventh heaven, or, possibly, consigning it to a Buddhistic Nirvana in which unconsciousness became both the cause and the evidence of bliss. And as to Carlyle himself, that later Carlyle, at least, to whom a younger and worthier predecessor had been ruthlessly immolated, can we view with unmingled regret the passing of those conversations in which all the puissances of his time underwent the ceremony of decapitation in a fashion too vividly suggestive of that Reign of Terror which his historic imagination had so strikingly portrayed?

To charge all this to the specific deficiencies of the Anglo-Saxon temper would be indiscriminating; part of it might, provisionally at least, be referred to a wider law by virtue of which the great talker is unpropitious to talk in the same way that the great individual is a menace to individuality. One recalls those consummately trained interlocutors of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues to whom every point is

ceremoniously referred with the deference of a modern Prime Minister in consulting the judgment of royalty, and whose perfect drill is exhibited in the punctual arrival of the "Very true," "That is evident," "Undoubtedly, Socrates," at the moment when corroboration is required.

It is not merely the race or abstract human nature that is unpropitious; the time also is unindulgent to the talker. All talk should be amateurish, but the amateur is everywhere shut in by the ubiquitous, the deplorable expert, just as in a thickly peopled district the camper-out is excluded by the increase of the resident proprietors. The expert in mathematics or zoology is relatively harmless, but the amenities of life suffered a cruel wrong when politics and literature and morals, the rightful or common property of man as man, became leased out to monopolizing specialists. There is always the smothering consciousness of some one at one's elbow or in the next room or the next street whose knowledge makes one's own opinions puerile. It is the edge of the unknown, the borderland of knowledge, that is perennially stimulating and suggestive, and, in the days when nobody knew too much about anything, every one could enjoy the excitement of living on the frontier. Nowadays all of us—experts apart—reside in the interior, and the encompassing territory has forfeited in our eyes, through its mastery and subjugation of others, the lure of the unpeopled wilderness. Our meadow, our woodland, is some one else's yard or park, and the check to exploration is decisive.

The ablest men are the most sensitive to the ban; the stupid are protected by imperviousness. One is meagerly consoled by that alternation of superiorities which the shift of topics tends to produce. Conversation should not be a throne from which the master gazes down into the reverent upturned eyes of the disciple on the stool at his feet, nor a see-saw in which each participant purchases the right to look down on his *vis-à-vis* from a dizzy elevation at one moment by the humiliation of looking up to him from a correspondingly abased position in the next. It should be a broad, roomy bench without variations of level, with latitude enough for the comfortable disposal and untrammelled movement of one's arms and legs.

The expert himself is only indirectly responsible for these troublesome and irritating restrictions; the blame, if blame there be, rests equally on the meekness of his auditors. I

belong to a tiny club in which informal discourses in various lines by competent investigators are followed by what it pleases us to call a discussion. As I have listened, after the conclusion of the address, to the obsequious "isn't-its," the deferential "don't-you-thinks," I have sometimes wondered if the declarative sentence were not to follow the potential mood into the limbo set apart for the outworn forms and discarded usages of English grammar. Any opinion, however idiotic, that stood upon its own feet would have immeasurably lightened the strain and eased the cramp of the undeviating submissiveness. The specialists had not brought about or invited this state of affairs; indeed, their freedom from egotism would have provoked aggression from any audience less stubborn in its docility. The fat man in the street-car seat does not wish to restrict his neighbor to a narrow third or fourth of the space theoretically halved between the two; the fact is merely the involuntary result of accumulations likewise involuntary. The expert must plead guilty to the accumulations, but he is often himself regretfully sensitive to the social incumbrance they involve. The fact that among our friends we say "you know," meaning "you don't know," bespeaks the sound general view that among well-bred persons superiorities are indiscretions.

When modes of procedure were discussed at the institution of this club, one of the members hardly proposed that informal talk both during and after the meal should occupy the two or three available hours. The cry was forthcoming: "We don't want to be bored!" One was happy to learn that an hour's efflux from the same mouth was so sure a specific against tedium; and one was interested to note the mood of mutual terror in which men seek each other's companionship. In conversation we are at each other's mercy, and our fear makes us rigorous. We are full of timid precautions and shuddering inhibitions. In England and America, the policing of conversation—if the term may be indulged—is not the less effectual for taking the form of a secret service. In addition to the inevitable and desirable proscription of the bore, the bully, and the blackguard, the unwritten law in these countries protects our hours of ease against three interlopers which in other lands might be hastily mistaken for benefactors. I have in mind the feeling, fancy, and style.

The Duke of Argyll in a brief reminiscence of Tennyson

sets it down as a high and rare proof of friendship that the poet once said to him in reference to Lady Tennyson: "It's a sweet, spiritual face, is it not?" In a land where so mild a self-unbosoment as this is a proof of the closest intimacy, the race may be social in its tight-girt, close-buttoned way, but the feelings are certainly eremitic. The Englishman loves by stealth: he is not only naturally shame-faced, but he fears by any exhibition of feeling apart from controversial heat or moral indignation to forfeit the dearest of the conversational rights—the right of satire. The Frenchman holds to his satire as closely as his insular neighbor but, if his literature be candid, he is less afraid of the effect of a humid atmosphere on the brilliancy or crispness of his pyrotechnics; he passes easily from mockery to feeling, and *vice versa*, and his sentiment does not thaw his cynicism, nor his cynicism freeze his sentiment. Whether the compatriots and co-linguists of Dickens really like the prohibitions which they so inflexibly maintain is a question for the analyst of racial tempers; one suspects sometimes an inner revolt, and asks himself if the awkwardness does not promote the reserve almost as much as the reserve sustains the awkwardness, if the Englishman's reticence in speech may not be compared to the novice's misgivings in a foreign language.

When fancy is in question, the prohibition is equally strict except possibly in the field of humor. In other words, you are allowed to display fancy, provided that you admit or proclaim—that it is nonsense.

The intrusion of style into conversation is the subject of an even harsher censorship. Even license has its points of exigence, and we pay for that informality which permits so many crudities and laxities in speech by an exaggerated and morbid sensibility to whatever savors of the stilted or formal. The reception of a "phrase" in conversation in English-speaking circles reminds one of the embarrassment which attends the unforeseen saying of grace in assemblies unaccustomed or disaccustomed to the rite. Still more disheartening is the respect with which the antithesis with its coxcombical double bow-knot is received among people for whom literature is an august and onerous responsibility. Even the epigram, which was once thought to be the acme of conversational felicity, has its unmistakable drawbacks: its hard, compact, glassy, orbicular finish may brighten a

conversation, but can scarcely give it impetus: it is segregated by its very perfection.

In this point, again, the French have the advantage. They have a language that takes on literature much more deftly and unconcernedly than English, a language that somehow always wants to be literary—that is, not quite at home in homely and vulgar uses, and escapes into literature, so to speak, with a sigh of relief. A tincture of style in the conversation does not impair its fluency or ease. In English we have noble and mighty styles, at their best quite commensurable with the French; but the language submits to style with a visible effort, under discipline or duress as it were, and the effort, even when slight, is distinct enough to be repugnant to that morbid sensibility to the formal or the finished which marks out studiously unstudied conversation. The difference between French and English talk in literary moods is the difference between a school-girl and a school-boy attired in their unwonted best for a gala day; the former takes naturally and happily to the splendors of the occasion; the latter is uncomfortable in the measure of his elegance.

All these restrictions denote a race which in its conversation is jealously and timidly self-protecting, which in this field prefers security to adventure, which guards its exemptions at the cost of shutting off its opportunities, a race in which the fear of being bored or displeased is far in excess of its thirst for entertainment. To such persons the pith of companionship is not intercourse, but propinquity; silence is scarcely a hardship, and the commonplace is a valued safeguard. It is a curious little paradox that our precautions against bores and fools should reduce our conversation to a featureless uniformity which drives us to the theater to divert ourselves with the Shakespearian or Goldsmithian counterparts of these very bugaboos. In all this I have no propagandist or reformatory purpose: I suspect the articulation or enmeshment of these reserves with the fiber of our race to be of a kind that postpones the hope of extrication to a future of mocking remoteness. After all, the bargain is not wholly ill-judged: we pay dear for immunities which are indisputably worth something.

There are two exceptions which Anglo-American vigilance allows to its conscientious adherence to the ascetic ideal in human intercourse: these are debate and humor. The lust

of combat sometimes breaks down the fortress of reserve, but the benefit to pure conversation is often questionable. I cannot but think that the debate in which gallant and hardy spirits rejoice is much better in the form of alarums and discursions (to borrow Mr. Chesterton's quaint, perhaps punning, recast of a Shakespearian stage-direction) than in the harsher form of a pitched battle. Many brief encounters at many distinct points, but few long engagements in the same position would be the maxim, if not the practice, of the discriminating. Long arguments leave the territories of both combatants overridden and laid waste without the compensation of an assured victory to either. The profits of extended discussion are conditioned on a prevision and thoroughness which our improvident and scatter-brained conversation is constitutionally incapable of supplying. It is difficult to find the true middle ground between a light fingering and rummaging, which is too casual and inconsecutive to produce results and an overhauling and overturning of the whole establishment, with the lamentable possibility of failing in the end to discover the thing wanted. Debate has its real value, and its fascination is incontestable; but, when earnest and protracted, it contradicts the true aim of sound conversation. The purpose of mutual speech is to find in other minds an access to fresh points of view, an escape from the provincialism of self; debate, if long and warm, has the effect of shutting a man up in the narrowness and airlessness of his original conviction.

On the side of humor, our good fortune is less checkered and less debatable. It is natural enough that races which deny themselves the luxury of outbreak should break their rule in favor of that peculiar form of overflow by which all other excesses and indiscretions are chastised. Humor is dear to us as the guarantee of sobriety; it represses every exuberance except its own. The English and American peoples are happily constituted in the quickness and ease of their self-recovery from the momentary intoxication induced by the advent of a joke. The perfect acrobat consummates his feat by the instant and easy resumption of the attitude of disengaged repose; there is an equal felicity in the sureness and quickness with which our stock recovers the normal level and balance after the unsettling somersault of humor. Exceptions, of course, may be found by the seeker. I have seen audiences listening to a diversified

address on which each new joke acted like another glass of champagne in the generation of a light-headed, almost tipsy mood, which destroyed the capacity for the taking-in of the serious ideas. This occurs more rarely in social groups, and almost never in what we call the dialogue. Indeed, the incursion of humor, overwhelming as its first superficial effects would appear, often fails to arrest not merely the flow of conversation, but even the continuity of topics. A joke in a party of serious men may be likened to a conflagration breaking out in the busy center of a great city; the temporary ravage may be great, but the influx of recuperative energies speedily offsets and overbalances the loss. In the association of humor and earnestness in the same proposition—so happily exhibited by the French—we are less successful than in the facility of transition from one form to the other. By way of indemnity for our self-restraint in other fields, we demand of humor a completeness of release, of self-abandonment, which the addition of point and luster gave to a grave insight is commonly insufficient to afford.

Debate is occasional, and humor sporadic: and what is the true inwardness, the final value, of conversation? A famous phrase doubtfully applied to poetry might be helpful or suggestive at this point: the criticism of life, or more precisely, the compared and contrasted criticism of life. This other man—there is an almost tragic finality in that *other*—what has he made of the world? Seated at my elbow, yet with the gulf of individuality between us, formed of the same block as myself, yet so curiously and definitively foreign—what shape has the universe taken in this singularly like but paradoxically and disquietingly different reflector? The answer to this question, not lumped in the abstract, of course, but dispersed into countless particulars, is the marrow and essence of conversation.

The ground of this interest is personality, but personality only, as a source of difference in the estimate formed of the common, the universal, material. Details of gains and losses, of migrations and business, are objectionable not because they are personal, but because they are impersonal; they have no foothold in individuality. I dissect a patty at the lunch-table at the moment when you butter a roll; but we all butter rolls or dissect patties in the course of the meal, and the moment of incidence is insignificant. Your children have the whooping-cough, and my brother is embarking for

Hong Kong; but the whooping-cough reaches every family some day, and at the same time every one's brother embarks for Hong Kong or its equivalent. Both facts are reckoned among the common liabilities, and the settlement of dates is immaterial. The interest that mutual friends take in these points is not properly conversational. On the other hand, every trifle that defines an attitude may be significant. It is a sign of culture to have reached clearness on the fact that, for purposes of conversation, the self is the least worthy of texts, but the most invaluable of commentators. All first-hand opinions are interesting as phenomena, however worthless they may be as verdicts. The amount or ability of the logical support is not always the decisive consideration; all temperaments are as such implicit valuations of the universe, and, in temperaments concentric, so to speak, with the frame of things, the valuation may abound in interest.

The abstract fact, the burly, hulking, unmannerly fact, is an unhappily large ingredient in transatlantic conversation. As things now stand its presence is an objectionable necessity. What with the vastness of general knowledge and the variety of individual acquisition, a difference of equipment on most topics is presumable in almost every pair or group of persons, and the ground must be leveled after a fashion before the real game can begin. The distribution of knowledge by such media is notoriously uneven and unsure and the variety of information which might be thought to insure piquancy is limited by the same restriction which affects the contents of baskets at a church picnic: they come from different larders, certainly, but from larders eventually dependent on the same primary sources of supply. In the conversation of two average men on politics one can almost hear the gentle susurrus or rustle of the inosculating sheets of the two journals they habitually read. If it be the rumble of justling folios that is audible, the effect is so much the worse.

All this turns conversation from a form of art to a branch of commerce. A fact in the mouths of intelligent talkers is much like a laborer on our lawns or in our parlors: he is none the less in the way for being temporarily indispensable. The vitalizing stir of personality is shut out; the fact remains a chattel bound to its possessor by an inorganic tie. People recite their little lesson with the vanity of well-drilled school-boys, or, still worse, with the authority of expert

pedagogues. To turn humanity into a guide-book or hand-book, a more rambling and less authentic Baedeker, is to ignore its higher, its really human, uses.

I would not, of course, pass an edict, even a tacit one, debarring information or domesticities or even egotisms from the field of conversation. I would merely recognize their status as aliens. The conservation of topics, the problems of the social commissariat, sometimes makes their aid a relief even when it is also a mortification. They remind us a little of the cheap lunch-counter or the shabby novel which we are quite content in our hours of physical or literary destitution to use as a resource, and equally content in our self-vindicating or self-compensating moments to turn into an object of ridicule or invective. In the great caravanserai of conversation, moreover, one expects, and half craves, a bold inclusiveness and venturesome diversity; its spirit is expressed in a mischievous dicking and temporizing with its own standards; a restiveness under its own law, a happy insolence toward its chosen ideals, are phases of its adhesion to those ideals and that law.

Finally, let us never slight the element of discovery in conversation. The best talk is in its nature a reconnoissance, a gay venture into untried and unsafe territory on the doubtful side of the mapped confines of truth. Too much of our talk is historical, a resort to yesterday, a consumption of deposits; the good truth is the truth that is born or reborn at the moment of utterance or of repetition. The interest of life is diminished by the fact that, left to ourselves, we approach our own thoughts, as we do our own houses, by stereotyped routes; the companionship of another may oblige us to freshen our perceptions by altering our course. Nothing helps talk more than a touch of skepticism, a distrust of finalities. The shrewd man knows that the soundest of his convictions probably shuts him out from the clear view of some other truth by which his misguided neighbor illegitimately profits. He loves to peer around the adverse and repellent wall of his own settled beliefs; he delights in the abrupt turn, the quick side-glance, which surprises the unwary and fugitive truth. Respectable proprietor as he unquestionably is, he is also something of the vagabond disposed to prowl with criminal designs in the vicinity of his own barns and hayricks. For men of this type the fortuities and the audacities of conversation have an equal suggestive-

ness. There are truths that lurk in the shadow of the unknown, that haunt the confines of error; they perish, like the unknown and the erroneous to which they cling, in the daylight of investigation. The difference, both moral and physical, between conversation and books is that you need a clear light to read by, but you may talk as long as you please in the twilight. One could wish at times that there were more play in conversation—not more levity (of that the supply is ample)—rather less levity and more play—more forays into the unknown, more hide-and-seek with truth, more temptings of possibility. We should share the detective's right of belying the truth in the endeavor to evoke or ascertain it.

But I linger too long on a theme whose very nature offers a certain countenance to loitering and discursiveness. To converse with a man is to concede to him a great privilege; it is to put our minds into his charge and conduct for many brief but swiftly recurring periods. But to read his essay, to yield up to another mind the exclusive direction of our thoughts, that is of our lives, for an hour more or less, the magnitude of that concession should make the recipient at once generous and circumspect. In conformity to which thought, at once flattering and admonitory, I make haste to conclude my essay.

O. W. FIRKINS.